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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study of the "Literacy in the Community" project examined what ordinary people read and write in their everyday lives, how they make sense of literacy, and how it fits into the rest of their daily activities, focusing on literacy in the home. Subjects, 20 adults from Lancashire, England, between the ages of 20 and 30 years who had left school as early as possible and who left school with minimal qualifications, underwent detailed interviews concerning the part literacy plays in their lives. Additional data consisted of ethnographic case studies of individual households, observation of neighborhood uses of literacy, and the collection of recorded data on access points for literacy. Preliminary findings suggest categories of significant topics necessary for a complete view of literacy: (1) literacy practices; (2) social practices; (3) roles people take; (4) networks of support; (5) the value of literacy; (6) literacy and change; and (7) how everyday processes of learning are revealed in the home. These categories are illustrated with examples from the data gathered in the study. (RS)

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Making sense of literacy, in the home.[1]

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1 Background

One important aspect of supporting early language development is the need to understand what reading and writing goes on in the home. We are contributing to this by describing in detail home literacy practices. In this paper I want to report on a research project entitled Literacy in the Community in which we are examining everyday reading and writing. This paper has three aims: firstly, to report on the literacy in the community project; secondly, to begin to provide a framework for highlighting what is significant about everyday literacy practices; and thirdly, to see what this tells us about the environment in which children are first learning about reading and writing.

In our study we are interested in what ordinary people read and write in their everyday lives, in how they make sense of literacy and in how it fits into the rest of their daily activities. We view this task of documenting and understanding everyday literacy as being an essential part of understanding the learning of literacy. In fact an important belief underlying this approach is that the key to learning is in everyday activities and how people make sense of them. We begin from everyday contexts; later moving on to examine the interface with school, and how home definitions carry over to the educational system.

We are using ethnographic methods and our work can be seen as part of developing a "practice" view of the nature of literacy, where the social meaning of literacy is of central importance and technical and functional aspects follow on from it. We talk in terms of literacy *practices*. Others may prefer terms like *activity* or *events* but they are all part of recent approaches which are attempting to link the social and the individual, and which have shifted the focus of attention from individual's skills or behaviours to practices, events or activities which people participate in. The methods we are using also involve a shift in emphasis; we are moving from reliance on quantitative approaches to incorporating (and developing) qualitative methods of analysis.

The studies which provide a background to our research include: Scribner & Cole's (1981) cross-cultural study of literacy among the Vai of West Africa; Heath's (1983) ethnographic account of the uses of reading and writing in three Appalachian communities in the United States; and Street's (1985)

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anthropological study of Islamic villagers in Iran developing new forms of literacy. There are other smaller studies which contribute to this approach. Fingeret (1983) in the United States has studied adult literacy students and the social networks they establish. Articles by Fishman, Klassen and Baynham in Barton & Ivanic (1990) examine the uses of literacy in different communities. Similarly, Reder (1985) has worked with Inuit and Hispanic communities. Focussing on children, Taylor (1985) and Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988) have used ethnographic methods to study literacy within the family in the United States.

Recent studies we have carried out at Lancaster provide further background to this study. Firstly, we have examined oral history data of working class people born around the turn of the century in North West England, collecting together what they said about reading, writing and education and using their words to build up a composite picture of the significance of literacy in their culture (Barton 1988.) Secondly, Hamilton (1987), analysed computer data from a large scale longitudinal study of a sample of the population of Britain (The National Child Development Study), focussing on reported difficulties in reading, writing and numeracy. The study provides a national overview of reading and writing problems which people encounter in their everyday lives. Its breadth provides a useful counterpoint to the detailed ethnographic approach here. Finally, Ivanic & Hamilton (1989) have begun to describe the practical pedagogical implications of the newer approaches to literacy which we are developing.

2 The current study

In the literacy in the community project we are addressing questions such as the following

1. What do adults read and write in their everyday lives? What role does literacy play in their everyday activities?

2. How does literacy interact with other communication practices?

3. What values and meanings do people attach to literacy?

4. Where people identify problems with literacy how do they solve them? What networks of support do they use and how do they utilise literacy in relation to other sources of information exchange?

The research has four aspects: detailed interviews; ethnographic cases studies of individual households; observation of neighbourhood uses of literacy; and the collection of recorded data on access point for literacy. The data for this paper are taken from the first part, interviews with twenty adults. In this paper, I want to concentrate on what posing the above questions can tell us about children's learning of literacy: How can we best describe the home context where children first make sense of the spoken and written word, and which provides a basis for later learning at school and elsewhere.

The adults we interviewed were mostly aged between twenty and thirty years old. They had all been to state schools in Lancashire and had left school as

early as possible, fifteen years in some cases, sixteen in others, and they left school with minimal qualifications. Most had identified some reading or writing problems as adults and most had gone back to some form of further education as adults.

Our intention when designing the interview was that it should be like an oral history interview. There were topics we wanted to cover but we also wanted to allow for the possibility of topics arising which we had not thought of beforehand. It took several months to bring together the questions for the interview. In the end, the interview contained more than one hundred and sixty questions, several of which had sub-divisions. They were divided into groups, roughly following the sections we discuss the results in, below. We should emphasise that we did not keep rigourously to these questions in the interviews. The aim of each interview was to encourage people to talk freely about the part literacy plays in their lives. The topics were not covered in any particular order: rather, the interview schedule was used by the interviewer to make sure that the topics we were interested in were covered at some point. The questions covered things as varied as: what people do with junk mail; how long they keep cards and letters and where they keep them; where they write; when they write; if they have problems who they turn to.

Each interview lasted around two hours. Most people were interviewed twice. In the second interview we were able to pick up on information we had not covered adequately in the first interview; we also found that the interviewees had thought more about the topics in the intervening time and, having had time to mull it over or discuss it with relatives, would arrive with further information for us. They all seemed to enjoy the interview process and welcomed the opportunity to talk about themselves and reflect on their lives with an attentive listener. No-one seemed surprised at the interest we were taking in everyday aspects of their lives.

3 Home literacy practices

In the remaining sections I want to do three things: to provide some categories of significant topics which are often not taken account of; to illustrate these with examples from our study; and to indicate how they are important to children learning literacy. There is only space here for the briefest results of our study; further details are provided in the article by Barton & Padmore in Barton & Ivanic (1990).

The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Each one was around fifty pages of text. Each interview is fascinating and is rich in anecdotes and observations about the significance of reading and writing in these people's lives. It is not obvious how to analyse this qualitative data.[2] A starting point is to list the literacy practices of the particular community, as any ethnographic study might, but we want to go beyond this and identify aspects of literacy that are not often studied. As a first step, we are analysing our data in terms of several themes. They provide a richer way of talking about literacy and identify significant aspects of the context of literacy which need to be incorporated into any theory of literacy learning. The set of themes comes from several sources; they come partly from our view of literacy as a social practice, they come partly from our earlier work and from the work of others. Some come from our data and, finally, they come from our own

experience of working in and talking to people in basic education. To give an idea of our results, here, firstly, I document the ***literacy practices***, what people actually read and write; then I situate them as being part of ***social practices***. Next, I examine particular ***roles*** people take and ***networks*** of support they participate in. This leads on to what ***value*** literacy holds for them. A theme which seems very rich when discussing children within families is ***literacy and change***. The last theme to be mentioned here, and only briefly, is the theme of how everyday ***processes*** of learning are revealed in the home. I will examine each of these themes in turn.

3.1 Literacy Practices

There are common patterns in reading and writing activities in any community and membership in any community is partly defined by knowing and participating in these practices. In our interviews we obtained a great deal of information about what people read and write in their day-to-day lives. Here I will just give some examples.

We asked people questions about where and when they wrote, and these were accepted as reasonable questions to ask. People tended to have a regular time and place for writing and often they preferred a particular type of pen and special paper. Often they wrote in a place and at a time when they could be by themselves. Several talked of needing quiet but a few reported writing in the living room in the evening while other people were watching television.

Many people could identify a place in their home where they can always find scrap paper for messages and they said that they have pens and pencils lying around the house. Each person's answer was slightly different. Often the paper was old envelopes kept in a particular drawer or scraps of paper or a memo pad kept by the telephone. In some households written messages of some sort were common and would be left in a set place known to family members. But in other homes written messages were virtually unknown. Whether or not people left messages for each other did not appear to be an indication of the amount of other writing done in the home. One or two people made daily plans of "things to do that day".

Several people do some regular writing, such as writing letters to friends or relatives. Even more common was keeping up contact with people by the regular sending of cards. Several people reported keeping a written list of the dates of people's birthdays and anniversaries. Sending post cards when on holiday was something which had to be done, again with a list of people to send them to.

We cannot get a feel of how common personal writing is in this community, but in a group of twenty people we were surprised at the number who do some personal writing. For example, one person kept a diary every day throughout a difficult period in his life when he was experiencing illness, unemployment and divorce; he describes how writing a diary helped him make sense of changes in his life. Others reported writing poems, for instance someone writing a poem for a friend going into hospital "to let her know that somebody cares".

3.2 Social practices

Literacy practices need to be seen as part of social practices. Literacy serves other purposes. In general, people do not read in order to read, nor write in order to write; rather, people read and write in order to do other things, in order to achieve other ends. People want to know what time the train leaves or how a new watch works; they want to make sense of their lives, or keep in contact with a friend; they want to make their voice heard. They need to pay the bills, or check the recipe for a cake.

Reading and writing can be part of these social activities. It fits in in different ways. It can be an integral part of the activity, or the relationship may be more complex. Reading or writing are often one option among others for achieving a given communicative goal, to find out when the train leaves there may be a choice between asking someone, phoning someone or looking in a timetable; each of these involves reading and writing in different ways. Patterns of choice may vary from one individual to another, people trust these forms of communication in differing amounts. The importance of viewing reading and writing in terms of social practices is that we see the purpose behind the activities; we also see how intertwined the written word is with other forms of communication, especially spoken language.

We can examine how all this impinges on the child. It is in the home that children learn much about how to act. This is where children are inducted into literacy. Many everyday activities invoke the use of literacy in some way and children can see in practical terms what adults achieve with literacy. Sometimes, it is central and its role obvious, at other times it is not so. Households may vary a great deal in the extent to which literacy has an explicit role. However, all homes in Britain are touched by literacy. There is still consumer packaging to get through, bills to pay, junk mail to sort and various official forms and notices to deal with. Junk mail cannot be avoided: you have to do something with it, even throwing it away involves sorting junk mail from bills and other letters.

The active participation of the child in all this can be seen. Children want to know if there is any mail for them. They want to choose particular cereals and avoid other ones. They want to know from the newspaper when a particular television programme is going to be on. They can see in all these activities the extent to which reading mediates these activties, how they have to go via reading to get the results they want, how they have to go via someone who reads. Reading mediates even to the extent of getting in the way of the activities, it takes time. Frustratingly for the child, the adult may stop to read the instructions before assembling a new toy or to read the recipe before cooking a chocolate cake with the child. Gradually, over time, there is a shift as the child takes control of these activites and learns to get information from the calendar, to identify the desired breakfast cereal, and to find out from the listings what is on television.

The home environment provides a context for the learning of literacy. Here the child can learn about literacy and know it is of value to adults. Both observing a social interaction and participating in a social interaction contribute to literacy learning. For many activities, children are incorporated into family activities. The aim of these activities is not to teach children

literacy and with many of them the activites are not particularly for the child. They may be for the benefit of adults and have no obvious relevance to the child. Nevertheless, as with other family activities the children are brought into these activities.

3.3 Roles

In our data, where people lived in families often there were clear roles with respect to reading and writing. Usually they followed the common division of women writing in the personal sphere while men dealt with the official world. This is reflected in a newspaper headline: "Wives write Xmas cards... Husbands write cheques" (Daily Mirror 17 April 1989). The headline sums up a common role division: In couples, often women write in the personal sphere, keeping in contact with friends and relations, while men deal with the business world. These roles can be adhered to to the extent that men are unable to write a personal letter and women not know how to write a cheque. However, this division is not a hard and fast one and the divisions are not always obvious. Difficulties with reading and writing, or particular skills in this area can affect roles people have.

Everyone interviewed plays a part in dealing with household correspondence but in most homes letter and card writing tends to be seen as the woman's responsibility, and dealing with forms and bills the man's. Generally, even in partnerships where the woman finds all aspects of literacy easier than the man, and in cases where the man can barely read or write at all, he will have a definite role to play in dealing with anything of a financial nature. Questions of power and status arise in seeing what is included in these roles.

Roles are much broader than this and in any social event people take particular roles. The importance of talking in terms of roles is that we see that people's literacy practices are not just to do with ***abilities***, but rather they are to do with what is or is not ***appropriate***. There are appropriate roles and there are inappropriate roles. To move away from describing people's actions just in terms of abilities is a significant step in our understanding of literacy.

We can see children's participation in roles. For some activities a child is an observer, for example the child can observe the different roles adults take, who gets to read the newspaper first, who opens the mail; and sometimes the children may be excluded from activities: 'Leave me alone, I'm reading the paper', 'I'll be with you in a minute, I've got some bills to pay'. Children observe these roles in others, such as the gender roles. They also take roles themselves. They are incorporated into the shopping or opening the mail in the mornings and from an early stage become participants in literacy practices.

3.4 Networks

Roles exist within networks. We can map the social networks of support which exist and the informal learning which takes place; Sometimes there is support

where people identify problems with literacy related activities. Where people have problems, their roles can be very different. Another aspect of these networks is that since these networks exist problems do not arise; people have networks of support which help them avoid problems.

In our data, when we asked people if they knew people in the neighbourhood who provided support, there were examples. Leslie's mother-in-law works in a newsagents shop and and is known to help customers writing greetings cards. These would be regular customers, often elderly people. She would help them choose cards, read out the messages to them, and sometimes write the cards for them. To these customers she would be acting as a **literacy broker.** This is not something only associated with people with low levels of literacy; rather, we all make use of particular people for support who we can regard as brokers for literacy activities. It may be a neighbour or friend who deals with figures or fills in the forms. It may be institutionalised: the railway officials who look up train times, the travel agents who fill in holiday forms for customers.

The notion of networks is important in trying to push our understanding of literacy beyond the standard accounts. One thing it emphasises is that reading and writing is not just an individual affair: often a literate activity consists of several people contributing to it.

Networks are also important for people's attitudes to education and the possibilities it can provide. Outside the immediate family, other relatives can be very influential. In our data, both Cath and Julie cited not their parents but other relatives as being strong influences on them as valuing education. People described learning networks for themselves and for their children which incorporated siblings, grandparents and other relations.

3.5 Values

We are going further than saying that there are social dimensions to literacy; we want to say it has a social meaning. People make sense of literacy as a social phenomenon and their social construction of literacy lies at the root of their attitudes towards literacy and their actions. It follows on from this that people's view of literacy is important in how and what they learn.

There are a range of moral and social values attached to writing. People have values, attitudes and feelings towards literacy and these values underlie their practices, affect what they do. It is in practices that values are expressed. For example, people often have strong views about reading at the meal table or writing in books. People have views about censorship of literacy materials. Children are being inducted into a world where such values form part of the fabric of home life.

Values are also clearly expressed in the relative value attached to literacy as compared with other domains, such as practical and physical activities. Sometimes reading and writing is contrasted with work, other times it is equated with leisure. In our historical study, for instance, we got the impression that people felt that it is better to be reading than to be doing nothing, but it is better to be doing some "real" work rather than reading. (See Barton 1988 for examples.) In all this children see how important literacy

is in relation to other activities. It is a commonplace observation that parental attitudes and actions influence a child's behaviour at school: it is necessary to clarify how these values form part of theories of how children learn to read and write.

3.6 Writing and change

Literacy is not static. The idea of literacy and change provides a very rich theme to explore and it is taking us in several directions. Firstly, if we explore people's personal histories we can examine how they use literacy to change their lives and how access to literacy provides new possibilities for change. The demands of life change and there are times in people's lives when they need to read and write more. It can be changes at work, or it can be changes in their personal lives, for example parents may experience changing demands when their young children grow up and go to school. It is often at points like these that adults identify problems and attend literacy classes.

Another aspect of change is the current rapid social change, where new technologies and political developments are changing the demands on people. New social practices give different possibilities, so that paying bills by instalments is easier, or new systems of paying by cheque in supermarkets require less literacy. Some social changes increase literacy demands, some reduce literacy demands.

A third notion of change is that from generation to generation, as people pass on a culture in a rapidly changing environment. In comparing different generations we see how practices are passed on from generation to generation. One thing which struck us in our data was examples of the ways in which the people we interviewed wanted life to be different for their children. Both Cath and Julie articulated this strongly and it was also expressed by other people with children. Cath left school with no qualifications. She was drawn into education while bringing up her children. She made a great effort to get her children to read, choosing books for them and helping them with their homework. Her husband appeared to have played no part in this. She saw it as "the only way out of the poverty trap for the children". Julie had gone back to education as an adult and expressed herself as desperate that her children should have the benefits of education; for her education had "opened up a new world" different from the one provided by her mother.

These people are passing on a culture in a changing environment. Often they expressed wanting something different for their children. Glyn, Neil and Heather were very concerned that "things should be different". However, this was not true for everyone. Yvonne, who had had problems with reading at school, seemed resigned that it was the same with one of her children "Oh, she's just like me", and felt this was a situation to be dealt with by the school.

3.7 Processes

I only want to mention this theme briefly here. It was a theme which arose in our data; we did not start out with the intention of exploring processes as this area has been well researched. In fact, reading and writing have often been seen just in terms of processes. However, processes are situated in a context and it struck us that in our data that there were several examples of everyday theories of learning, where people articulated parts of the theories of learning they were operating with. One person hung lists of words around the house in order to memorise them - although reporting that it turned out to be completely ineffective. Another person writes new words on scraps of paper, "to take them out of the jumble on the page". Presumably, children's theories of learning to some extent come from their experiences at home with everyday theories of learning.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion I have been trying to do several things at the same time. One use of this study is to document the uses of writing in this particular community. A second aim has been to demonstrate that the themes, such as networks and values, are ones which are necessary for a complete view of literacy. Thirdly, there is the argument that understanding these practices is crucial for understanding children's learning of literacy.

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-- Notes --

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2. Of course, there are methods for analysing qualitative data: I believe they need to be more explicit and that researchers need to be more conscious of what they are doing at the stage of data analysis. We aim to develop qualitative methods of research and, for example, are exploring computer methods of analysis.